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SUBJECT: ANATOMY OF AN INSURGENCY - DECLINING SECURITY IN
AFGHANISTAN'S NORTHWEST

Classified By: PRT and Sub-National Governance Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Though by no means comparable to the situation in Afghanistan's south and east, the security climate in the country's northwest is worsening in certain districts, and this has local officials concerned. A particular worry is the situation in Ghormach district, administratively transferred late last year from Badghis to Faryab province. There UNAMA has encouraged GIROA, ISAF and the international community to focus efforts on the security, development and governance fronts in order to turn the corner on a nagging insurgent problem. The origins of that particular security challenge lie in the inter-tribal conflicts and the absence of a government able to mediate those conflicts or protect people from the resulting violence. The case of Ghormach also raises questions about the ability of the insurgency to spread and put down roots. That is exactly what Afghan authorities in the area fear may be happening and they worry that the lack of sufficient security forces leaves their region vulnerable. Of note, they do not appear to have much faith in ISAF's ability to assist them so are instead looking for their own solutions. End summary.

Putting the "Integrated Approach" Under the Microscope

¶2. (SBU) The "peaceful" northwest is not so peaceful these days, as witnessed first-hand by Mazar-e-Sharif's State PRT officer and visiting Embassy sub-national governance officer during their mid-June travels in Jowzjan and Faryab provinces. Their main objective was to assess developments regarding the UNAMA-generated "integrated approach" in one of its two pilot efforts, namely in Ghormach district. Ghormach and neighboring Morghab district have long been Pashtun-inhabited centers of insurgent activity. Both have been part of Badghis province, but Ghormach was temporarily transferred to Faryab at the end of 2008 in light of the inaccessibility of the district from the Badghis capital of Qal-e Naw, home of the Spanish PRT.

¶3. (U) The integrated approach (IA) itself involves the identification of certain "tipping districts" where UNAMA believes a concentration of effort in terms of security, governance and development can prevent an area from going bad or pull it back from serious deterioration. The other pilot, Tagab district in Kapisa province, is currently seen as lagging behind Ghormach, though that may change now that USAID is to begin funding the Independent Directorate of Local Governance's (IDLG) Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) there.

¶4. (U) In April a group of Kabul-based stakeholders traveled to Maimana, Faryab's capital, to consult with Governor Shafaq, the provincial Afghanistan National Police (ANP) commander, his National Directorate of Security (NDS)

counterpart, the local UNAMA office and Norwegian-led PRT Maimana and launch the integrated approach for Ghormach. Since then, a provincial integrated approach working group has met twice in an effort to keep the program on track.

¶15. (C) SRSG Kai Eide recently told Emboff that he is about ready to pull the plug on the integrated approach because he does not see it paying a dividend within a reasonable timeframe commensurate with UNAMA's investment of time and energy in the initiative. Judging from the situation in Ghormach, however, it may be a bit premature to draw that conclusion, though admittedly only a small start has been made to date on implementing IA there.

The Security Line of Operation

¶16. (C) On the security front, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), supported by Regional Command North (RC-N), launched Operation Tufan (sandstorm) in mid-May to secure the route of the ring road through Ghormach and allow the Chinese contractors to resume work on the road up to the border with Morghab district. This comes in the wake of the November 3 kidnapping of three supervisory engineers on the road project and the April 2 abduction of 16 others. Since that time, according the country director of the Asian Development Bank in Kabul (which is funding construction of the ring road in the north), the China Railways contractors have refused to leave their construction camp outside the Ghormach district center, along with Swedish, Croatian and Norwegian troops. Only Norwegian soldiers from the PRT in Maimana now remain, but several hundred ANA troops are still deployed in the

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district and prospects appear good for one battalion to stay at least until the new police force is fully deployed and functional.

¶17. (C) As a result of the operation, Governor Shafaq notified the Ministry of Public Works that the ring road project can resume, and a Norwegian intelligence officer at PRT Maimana indicates there are some first signs of cooperation from local residents on the security front. The RC-N liaison officer at ISAF headquarters, however, admits the operation was not as successful as hoped, inasmuch as the planned parallel push up from the south did not materialize when approaching ANA 207th corps troops became bogged down. He does, however, believe it likely a new stage in the operation will be mounted from the north once ANSF and international forces are freed up after the upcoming elections.

The Development Line of Operation

¶18. (C) So far there is precious little going on in the development track in desperately poor Ghormach. The Bangladeshi NGO BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) has been conducting some public health work as part of its Badghis outreach, but it remains to be seen whether this will continue now that Ghormach has been transferred to Faryab. Otherwise only the French NGO Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) is active in the district. The Norwegians have extended their ongoing \$4.5 million broad-based development initiative until the end of the year, and Ghormach now qualifies for some of this spending. According to the UNAMA representative in Maimana, the Norwegian Ambassador expressed interest in increasing aid for Ghormach during a recent visit. So far, though, only the Germans have stepped up to the plate, with a commitment of 10 million euros in National Solidarity Project (NSP) funding earmarked for Ghormach and adjacent Kuhistan district in Faryab proper -- this latter the least developed and most isolated part of Faryab, referred to by one Norwegian PRT rep as a "black hole" (with attendant security implications). These NSP projects are not expected to be implemented for a

good 6-12 months, not least because Ghormach remains one of a minority of districts in the country that have yet to establish the Community Development Councils (CDCs) needed to nominate projects.

The Governance Line of Operation

¶9. (C) If security has improved, at least provisionally, and some prospects for development may be on the horizon, governance in Ghormach remains a catastrophe. This state of affairs is directly reflective of the underlying problem at the heart of the insurgency in the district: namely, the bitter divisions between the three rival Pashtun tribes and sub-tribes making up the bulk of the population. One is led by strongman Abdullah Jan, while another claims Qari Dawlat - the current district administrator - as its own. The Jan faction intervened with the IDLG last summer to cement its hold on political power, but it was outmaneuvered by supporters of Qari Dawlat who approached the President directly and got their man appointed. In mid June when Faryab Governor Shafaq visited the Abdullah Jan-led local shura to seek cooperation so as to allow development projects to proceed, Jan flatly refused, insisting nothing will budge until his arch-rival is removed from office (not long after Qari Dawlat's appointment, Jan entered Dawlat's office and physically attacked him). Governor Shafaq believes the only solution is to bring in a Pashtun from outside the district who is acceptable to the various factions, but he is unable to identify anyone qualified who would be willing to work in Ghormach. IDLG Deputy Director Barna Karimi is sympathetic to Shafaq's proposal but indicates no change is likely after the elections.

Anatomy of an Insurgency: Ghormach

¶10. (C) The chairman of the Faryab Provincial Council, Faukhdin Jenab, and the district administrator in Qeysar district (adjacent to Ghormach), Mohammad Toraq, provide consistent explanations of how Ghormach became the insurgent hotbed it has become in recent years. In Ghormach, both Durrani and the rival Ghilzai tribes of Pashtuns are present, with Durrani further divided into several sub-tribes, including the Achakzais and Alizais. According to Toraq, these groups have been led by strongmen whose chief preoccupation has been their personal power rather than the

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welfare of their tribe of some larger, national interest. Over time, a whole series of disputes arose and grievances accumulated between the groups. At one point, one of these leaders sought outside assistance from the Taliban to get the upper hand. With virtually no Afghan government present able either to mediate the underlying disputes or protect the factions from the brute force of their neighbors, others reached out to the Taliban for assistance. That assistance, however, came with strings, including the presence of radicals from Kandahar and Uzbekistan whose money and preaching made inroads with the young. Eventually, local elders lost control of the situation and only at that point showed interest in cooperating with Afghan authorities. But by then those authorities faced a tremendous governance challenge. As Jenab sees it, the work of the district administrator is like the futile efforts of someone in the middle of a dump trying to clear at least a small area of filth: "When the wind stirs, the garbage just blows back."

Unsettling Knock-on Effects

¶11. (C) Every interlocutor contacted either during the trip or in the course of related follow-up in Kabul conveyed the same judgment - security in the northwest is deteriorating. The ADB country director, for example, notes that explosions in culverts along the ringroad in the north are now fairly

commonplace, with incidents in Faryab more frequent than elsewhere. Afghan officials in the region see a link to Ghormach. Adjacent Qeysar is a case in point, where District Administrator Taroq recounts efforts by infiltrating Taliban to collect religious "taxes" in the area. According to a report received by the UNAMA representative in Maimana, in early June a Qeysar village was treated to Taliban justice when a widow there was forced to execute the murderer of her husband. More recently still, four policemen manning a checkpoint along the Maimana-to-Qeysar road were murdered by insurgents, with one man beheaded and the bodies of all four set on fire. Governor Zari in Jowzjan, along with officials in Faryab, insists Taliban from Ghormach as well as agents of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have been instrumental in reviving and radicalizing a criminal group in Sayyad district of Sar-e Pul. In just the last few months the group is said to have swelled to about 80. Several interlocutors recounted how the group now moves between Sayyad and neighboring Darzab district in Jowzjan and Belcheragh district in Faryab and even further afield, extorting tribute from increasingly intimidated villagers. It remains unclear whether this group was responsible for the three IED attacks in June along the new ring road around Dawlatabad between Andkhoy and Maimana. Two days after our PRT rep and Emboff passed the scene, a district police chief inspecting the damage was gunned down by attackers hiding in the nearby fields. A Taliban spokesman later claimed responsibility.

¶12. (C) The Governors of Faryab and Jowzjan, along with the heads of their Provincial Councils, are united in worrying openly about what they see as a real threat to what has been their relative security. Of note, they are unsparing in their judgment of ISAF in the North, dismissing as "a waste of money" initiatives like Operation Tufan that net few insurgents (the RC-N liaison at ISAF headquarters estimates that 10-15 insurgents may have been killed). They, along with official in Faryab, express deep concern about what they see as a fleeting opportunity to get control of the situation before insurgent elements make major inroads and entrench themselves. All of these officials insist their populations - despite their non-Pashtun ethnicity - are vulnerable because of their poverty and ignorance and - most significantly - the lack of ANSF. A meeting with tribal elders in Tagab-i Herak village (actually a grouping of 22 villages) in southernmost Qeysar district revealed another reason: isolation. They have to walk halfway up a mountain to get a cell phone connection to call for help. Jowzjan Provincial Council chairman Mohammed Akram, who hails from Darzab district, reports that members of the band of insurgents now based in Sar-e Pul has operated in broad daylight within about 3 miles of Darab's district center and its ANP contingent. It is this vacuum, they suggest, that frightens them. It is not that the insurgents are so numerous but that there is so little standing in their way.

¶13. (C) As to solutions, the district administrator in Qeysar recommends for Ghormach a three-pronged approach: reconcile the reconcilable, eliminate those who remain opposed and tackle the community's underlying disputes. He also calls for school buildings to elevate the standing of education and electricity to bring the outside world into people's lives. Jowzjan PC Chairman Akram suggests either

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that ISAF and Coalition forces surround and eliminate the insurgents or that GIROA arm properly vetted villagers to allow them to protect themselves. His Faryab counterpart similarly advocates "elimination" of the insurgents, or at least their imprisonment, and also supports vetting and arming select residents of insecure districts. Jowzjan Governor Zari espouses this view too. Faryab Governor Shafaq wants to see the ANP adopt partisan-style tactics to beat back the insurgent menace. The governors of the two provinces, along with their colleague from Sar-e Pul, met in early June and agreed to pool intelligence and police resources to try to regain the upper hand. They purposely

did not invite ISAF to attend their session.

Comment

¶14. (C) It is important to keep in mind that, even with its problems, the insurgent threat in Afghanistan's northwest is far from reaching the level facing the south and east. Moreover, it is far from clear that all of the recent incidents in the northwest are attributable to insurgents. But what is clear is that Afghan officials in this region are genuinely concerned about the deteriorating security in particular districts and the possibility that insurgent activity will spread to other districts in the absence of a credible ANSF deterrent. It is certainly possible the Taliban are simply flexing their muscles in the face of the U.S. build-up and want to get across the message that, build-up or no, their reach is large and no place is truly safe.

¶15. (C) The question, though, remains: Is the northwest inherently stable or has it remained more or less peaceful simply because that stability has not been challenged? Certainly some of our Afghan interlocutors appear to believe the latter. If they are correct, it may prompt reconsideration of the current practice of transferring police from the region to Kabul or elsewhere. At least in the special case of Ghormach, Minister of Interior Atmar appears to think this practice does not make sense. One take-away from our conversations is the unanimity of views on the need to "eliminate" the hardcore radicals. Another is the importance of additional development assistance, including in the areas of education, agriculture and power. Finally, it maybe be worth considering whether, in certain parts of a less peaceful Afghan northwest, there might be a role for the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) and even the Afghanistan Public Protection Program. This last would certainly correspond to the prescription outlined by the Jowzjan and Faryab PC chairmen and the Jowzjan Governor. Unfortunately, as the IDLG's Barna Karimi recently noted, it is all but certain the Swedes and Finns, in whose area of operations such a deployment seems most appropriate, would not support such a move.
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